

Chinese Pidgin Russian

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1. Introduction

Chinese Pidgin Russian (autoglossonyms: *lomanəj jazyk*, *lomanəj ruskij*, literally ‘broken language’, ‘broken Russian’) was spoken between the last decades of the eighteenth and the middle of the twentieth century in the vast territories along the Russian–Chinese border in southern Siberia and the Russian Far East, in northern China in the city of Harbin, and along the Chinese Far East Railway built by Russia in Manchuria in 1903. This pidgin has been extinct for several decades, but some elderly (over 70 years old) representatives of Siberian minorities can still be considered semi-speakers of Chinese Pidgin Russian. They number probably around 50. It is difficult to say to what extent the modern pidgin which has recently appeared in the course of the shuttle trade on the Russian–Chinese border is connected with the old pidgin that is the subject of this chapter.

2. Sociohistorical background

Chinese Pidgin Russian arose in the course of Russian trade with China and the Russian colonization of southern Siberia. The colonization of Siberia differed from the Western colonization of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas: contacts with local ethnic groups were primarily restricted to trade and the collection of fur taxes. There was no mass resettling of people of different nations who would have to use Pidgin as the unique means of communication. This explains why Russian-based pidgins were never creolized.

The first Russian-based pidgin to be observed was the “Kyakhta language” (or “Maimachin dialect”) on the border of the current Buryat Republic and Mongolia. The existence of a peculiar “trade language” on the border with China was first mentioned by George Timkowsky (Timkowsky 1827). The Kyakhta language was soon noticed by linguists (N. Bichurin, S. Chrepanov, A. Aleksandrov, H. Schuchardt, S. Bulich). It was deliberately standardized by the Chinese: all merchants dealing with Russia had to learn “the Russian language”, using phrase books and dictionaries in which Russian words were transcribed with Chinese characters (Flug 1935). The Kyakhta variant was therefore probably the only Russian-based pidgin that acquired a de facto norm.

The origin of the Kyakhta language is disputable. There is some evidence that it was brought to Kyakhta by Russian merchants who used a Russian-based pidgin before in contacts with

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Autoglossonym:	<i>lomanəj jazyk</i> , <i>lomanəj ruskij</i>
Other names:	Russian–Chinese language, Kyahta language, Maimachin dialect
Number of speakers:	Full speakers: none; semi-speakers: 50
Major lexifier:	Russian
Other contributing languages:	Chinese, Mongolian, Tungusic languages
Location:	Southern Siberia, Russian Far East (Russia), Manchuria (China)
Official language of Russian Federation:	Russian
Official language of China:	Mandarin Chinese



Map 1.

other ethnic groups, including contacts in the White Sea area (Nichols 1996: 240) or speakers of Uralic or Altaic languages (Kozinskij 1974; Perekhvalskaya 2006). According to another point of view, it was a result of the relexification of an old Mongolian-based trade pidgin.

At any rate, carriers of a Russian-based pidgin between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries were Russian merchants, fur tax collectors, members of the religious sect of Old Believers, Cossacks, adventurers, and officials. They brought it to new

territories, which were gradually added to the Russian Empire: the basin of the Amur river, the Ussuri region, and later to the Chinese territory along the Chinese Eastern Railway and the city of Harbin. Chinese Pidgin Russian became the lingua franca of the big cities of the region (Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, Harbin), where there were large Russian and Chinese communities. In the 1920s, the number of Chinese in Vladivostok was estimated at 30,000; they were mostly workers and small retailers. Chinese Pidgin Russian was the main means of communication between the communities.

After the 1930s, the mass migration of Russians from the European part of the USSR to rural areas of Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Far East transformed the local ethnic groups into small minorities. The newcomers did not use and, most probably, did not know any Pidgin; they spoke standard Russian to Pidgin speakers. Chinese Pidgin Russian then entered the phase of a post-pidgin continuum. Pidgin forms began to be substituted by those which were closer to standard Russian. Still, the Russian speech of older representatives of the local ethnic minorities displays obvious residual pidgin features.

The Chinese population was deported from the USSR in the late 1930s, so Chinese Pidgin Russian lost its importance as a lingua franca. The urban variety soon disappeared completely.

3. Sociolinguistic situation

Chinese Pidgin Russian was a means of communication between “European” and “Asian” groups. Europeans belonged to the upper strata of the society: officials, superiors, house owners in the cities; administrators, doctors, and teachers in rural areas. The European community consisted of Russians and other ethnic groups (Ukrainians, Poles, Germans). The Europeans regarded Pidgin as a primitive means of communication solely reserved for “Asians”. The latter were Chinese in the cities and trading centers, but also Tungusic people in the countryside.

Chinese migration to Russia was entirely male; women were not allowed to leave the Celestial Empire. In the Russian territory, Chinese men married Nanai, Udihe, or Evenki women. The means of communication in these mixed families was a simplified form of Chinese. Marriages of Chinese men with European women were very rare. Thus, there were no conditions for the creolization of Chinese Pidgin Russian.

As for gender-related use of the Pidgin, the situation was different for European and Asian communities. Chinese contacts with Russians were carried out exclusively by men; among Tungusic groups, men also had more opportunities to interact with Europeans. Women were either monolingual or bilingual, speaking the language of the neighbouring group. By contrast, European women were fully integrated into the interaction with other groups, especially with Chinese men, who were often hired as workers.

During World War II and later on, males of ethnic minorities began to be conscripted into the Soviet military service. As a result, men began to speak more Russified forms of Pidgin. Therefore, women became the predominant users of Chinese Pidgin Russian. Nowadays, the majority of semi-speakers of Pidgin are old women of Udihe, Nanai, or Evenki origin.

The available data on Chinese Pidgin Russian are a collection of documents and recordings made over a significant period of time in a rather vast area. Certain details of grammar and lexicon differ in different sources, so the spread of a particular feature may be limited to a certain territory or epoch. However, the amount of common features makes it possible to refer to Chinese Pidgin Russian as basically one language which existed in several varieties.

3. Phonology

Chinese Pidgin Russian has a vowel system of seven vowels (see Table 1). Central vowels present a complete set for all degrees of aperture: /u/, /ə/, and /a/. There are no contexts where [u] and [ə] would be opposed. /u/ is usual in words of Russian and Chinese origin: ['sunka] ‘son’; [tata'du] ‘big, large’. It is always stressed; [ə] is unstressed and appears frequently between groups of consonants. In words of Russian origin, it corresponds to reduced variants of vowels: [tə'ri] ‘three’, [kə'rasinə] ‘red’, [gu'magə] ‘paper’.

Chinese Pidgin Russian has 18 consonants, listed in Table 2. Allophonic variants are given in parentheses, and special spelling counterparts are in angle brackets.

Voiceless plosives have an aspirated variant mainly in the Chinese ethnolect. Uvular [q] and [χ] substitute for velar [k] and [x] before /a/ and back vowels in variants characteristic for speakers of Tungusic languages. Trill [r] and flap [ɾ] are free variants of the phoneme /l/, the major variant of which is represented by the lateral approximant [l]. Labiodental [v] is characteristic only for the Russian ethnolect. Labiovelar [w] and bilabial [β] are distributed similar to [q] and [k]: labiovelar [w] appears before /a/ and back vowels, and [β] occurs before front vowels: /da'waj/ ‘let us’, ['βidili] ‘you (we, they) have seen’ (Russian *davaj, videli*).

The dental sibilants [s] and [z] appear only in the Russian ethnolect. The major variant for the voiceless fricative is the palato-alveolar [ʃ]. As for the corresponding voiced fricative [ʒ], it is a minor variant of the phoneme /dʒ/, [dz] being another

Table 1. Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i	u	u
Mid	e	ə	o
Open		a	

Table 2. Consonants

		Bilabial	Labio-dental	Labio-velar	Dental/alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Uvular
Plosive	voiceless	p (p ^h)			t (t ^h)			k (k ^h)	(q)
	voiced	b			d			g	
Nasal		m			n		ɲ	ŋ	
Trill/flap					(r) (r)				
Fricative	voiceless	ɸ			(s)	f		x	(χ)
						⟨š, sh⟩			
	voiced	β	(v)		(z)	(ʒ)			
Affricate	voiceless				(ts)	tʃ			
					⟨c⟩	⟨č, ch⟩			
	voiced				(dz)	dʒ	⟨ʒ⟩		
Lateral/ approximant				(w)	l		j		

variant of the same phoneme. The affricate [ts] exists as a minor variant of the palato-alveolar [tʃ].

The syllable structure is V or CV. Consonant clusters are impossible except for the combination of sonorant (nasal or lateral) + obstruent (plosive or fricative). In these combinations, the consonants may be separated by [ə]: [ˈmamka], [ˈmaməka] ‘mother’. The complexity of onsets depends on the native language of the speaker. Simple syllable onsets are characteristic for speakers of Chinese, Udihe, and Nanai (and other languages of the Tungusic group). Russian native speakers may produce more complex onsets, though they also tend to simplify them with respect to the corresponding Russian words. Very few consonants may be found in syllable codas: mainly *j* and *n*.

4. Noun phrase

Nouns are invariable, for example, *maja* – *liudi* ‘I am human’; *dəwa liudi* ‘two people’. **Natural gender** is expressed by different words: *maməka* ‘mother’, *papa* ‘father’; *ženəs’inə* ‘woman’, *muʒikə*, *musinnə* ‘man’. There are no instances of expressing gender of animals.

Number marking. Depending on the context, nouns may refer to singular or plural entities: *godə* ‘year, years’, *lubəli* ‘ruble, rubles’, *kazəka* ‘tale, tales’. In certain variants of Pidgin, the plural marker *isio*, *sio* was in the process of grammaticalization. It could occur only with human nouns and probably had the meaning of collective plurality: *ribiatiskə isio* ‘children’; *ibəŋka isio* ‘the Japanese’. However, even in these variants it is not obligatory. The plural marker never occurs with numerals.

There is neither a definite nor an indefinite **article**. Generic noun phrases are not marked.

There is only one **demonstrative** which precedes the noun. It is attested in two forms of Russian and Chinese origin *eta/*

chega: *chega fanza shipko shango* ‘this house is very good’; *eta liudi* ‘this person, these people’. *Chega* was characteristic of the variant of Chinese Pidgin Russian spoken in Vladivostok and Manchuria. The demonstrative *eta* was more widespread; in some varieties of Chinese Pidgin Russian, the demonstrative *eta* was used so often that it was probably turning into a definiteness marker (see below). There is no difference between adnominal and pronominal demonstratives: *eta* was also used as a demonstrative pronoun.

Possessive constructions: adnominal possessives precede the noun and have the same form as subject and object pronouns in the core variants: *maja synka* ‘my son’; *ihinđomə* ‘their house’; *ty babəsəkə* ‘your grandmother’ (see Table 3). No examples of independent pronominal possessors are found in the existing data. The possessive noun phrase shows the order possessor + possessee; both participants are unmarked:

- (1) *Eta bəratə synə iwo gamali-la.*
this brother son 3SG speak-pfv
‘The brother’s son talked about it.’ (LJČ)¹

Numerals are usually of Russian origin, but there are instances of the use of Chinese numerals, *iga* ‘one’ and *lianga* ‘two’.

Adjectives are invariant and precede the noun: *xulaoshi dumal* ‘good merchandise’, *deriani liudi* ‘bad person’, *kəlasimə liudi byli* [beautiful people were] ‘there were beautiful people’.

In the core variants of Chinese Pidgin Russian, **pronouns** have a single form for subject, object, oblique, and possessive, as in *maja synka* ‘my son’; *maja laobodaj* ‘I work’; *húdo néta majá* [bad not.exist me] ‘there is nothing bad for me’.

The first- and second-person-singular pronouns *wo/wody* (‘I’) and *ni/nidy* (‘you’), of Chinese origin, were widespread in the Vladivostok and Manchuria variants; the Chinese “possessive” forms *wo-dy* [I-POSS] and *ni-dy* [you-POSS] were used mainly as subject and object pronouns.

The forms *maja* ‘I’ and *təwaja* ‘you’ (based on the Russian feminine singular possessives *moja* ‘my’, *tvoja* ‘your’) are typical for old variants (18th–19th c.); *mine/tibi* (Russian dative *mne/tebe*; genitive *menia/tebia*) were widespread in the twentieth century. Forms coinciding with the Russian subject pronouns *ja* and *ty* always coexist with the forms mentioned above. They tend to be used as subject pronouns, but are also attested in the function of adnominal possessives.

Subject pronouns are not obligatory and are often omitted:

- (2) *Pasmətəri – kapitan jest’, kazəkə jest’.* *Maja tagda*
look captain be Cossack be 1SG then
pəriamə xadi.
straight walk
‘I saw that these were Cossacks with a chief. Then I went straightly [to them].’ (A)

¹ Example source codes are explained at the end of this chapter.

Table 3. Pronouns

	Subject	Object	Adnominal possessives
1SG	<i>maja/mine/ja/wo/wody</i>	<i>maja/mine</i>	<i>maja/mine/ja</i>
2SG	<i>təwaja/tibi/ty/ni/nidy</i>	<i>təwaja/tibi/nidy</i>	<i>təwaja/tibi/ty/nidy</i>
3SG	<i>iwə</i>	<i>iwə</i>	<i>iwə</i>
1PL	<i>nasha</i>	<i>nasha</i>	<i>nasha</i>
2PL	<i>washa</i>	<i>washa</i>	<i>washa</i>
3PL	<i>iwə/ixiñ</i>	<i>iwə</i>	<i>iwə/ixiñ</i>

Special indefinite pronouns exist only for inanimate objects, and are attested only in the object function:

- (3) *Xetszu famili chiwo-chiwo kupi-la.*
 Xeczu family.name something buy-PFV
 ‘A person by the name of Xeczu bought something.’ (Sh)

The word for ‘somebody’ is a generic noun: *adin liudi* (lit. ‘one person’).

5. Verb phrase

As Chinese Pidgin Russian was always a spoken auxiliary idiom, it never had any stable norm, not even a de facto one. Therefore the grammatical rules that are given below were often violated.

Chinese Pidgin Russian has three tense–aspect markers and a zero marker. All overt markers follow the verb: *budu/budi* (future), *la* (perfective), *esa/esi/ju* (perfective or evidential). Combinations of markers are not possible. The rare occurrences of the forms *ju-la* and *la-ju*, which could be interpreted as a combination of *ju+la*, do not belong to the core structure of the language.

The zero marker expresses habitual and imperfective (and progressive) aspect in present or past tense; the perfective markers express accomplished events; and the future marker marks future events. In Table 4 the markers are displayed in relation to different Aktionsart meanings of the verb: dynamic terminative (*lamaj* ‘break’, *pusəkaj* ‘let go, put down’); dynamic non-terminative (*gawali* ‘speak’, *pachitaj* ‘read’) and stative (*səpi* ‘sleep’, *sidi* ‘sit’).

There are two sets of perfective markers: *la/li* and *esa/esi/ju/byla/jula*. Nichols (1996) considers *esi/est* to be an evidential marker (see the discussion below). There are no varieties of Chinese Pidgin Russian which would have perfective markers of both sets at the same time. *Esa/esi* and *est* are purely phonetic variants (<Russian *est* ‘is’). *Ju/jula* are of Chinese origin and go back to the Mandarin Chinese verb *yǒu* ‘exist, have’. *Byla* is very rare (<Russian *byla* ‘was (fem.)’). The perfective expresses an accomplished action or a change of state; there are instances of the perfective in the future:

- (4) *Tagəda siwoni, sontsa kanchaj, nasha Iman najdi est’.*
 then today sun finish 1PL Iman find pfv
 ‘Then today at sunset we will already have reached the Iman-river.’ (A)

Chinese Pidgin Russian does not have overtly expressed mood markers. There are two strategies for expressing imperative meaning. It is often expressed by a zero-marked verb with or without a second- or first-person-plural subject pronoun:

- (5) *Tibe sam pasəmati!*
 2SG self look
 ‘Look yourself!’ (A)

The imperative may also be expressed by the modal word *nada* ‘it is necessary’, the negative form of which forms the prohibitive:

- (6) *Nada tixa sidi, chiwo-chiwo lamaj ni nada,*
 necessary still sit what-what break NEG necessary
gawari tozha ni nada.
 speak also NEG necessary
 ‘Sit still, do not make any noise, do not speak either.’ (A)

The prohibitive could also be expressed by the negative form of a zero-marked verb.

As Chinese Pidgin Russian simple sentences are often subjectless (because the pronominal subject may be omitted), there is no formal distinction between imperative and indicative forms. Forms such as subjunctive, optative, and conditional are expressed either by a zero-marked verb or by the combination of the verb with modal words.

- (7) *Səpichəki najdi, kushaj najdi – pərapadi netu.*
 matches find eat find be.lost NEG
 ‘If one finds matches and food, one would not perish.’ (A)

Table 4. Tense–aspect markers

Marker	Aktionsart	Tense/aspect meaning
Ø	Any (dynamic, stative)	Habitual present and past imperfective, generic present
<i>budu/budi</i> <i>la</i>	Dynamic	Progressive present and past
	Any	Future
	Dynamic terminative	Perfective: accomplished action; aorist
	Dynamic non-terminative	Perfective: action limited in time; aorist
<i>esi/esa/ju</i> <i>jula</i>	Stative	Perfective: completed change of state
	Dynamic terminative	Perfective: accomplished action with current relevance/evidential
	Dynamic non-terminative	Action limited in time; repeated action
	Stative	Repeated action

There are two main strategies of verbal negation; each one is typical for a particular variety of Pidgin. Older varieties used the postverbal particle *netu/nitu* (< Russian negative existential verb *net*, *netu* ‘there is no’); newer ones used the prepositional particle *ne/ni* (< Russian verbal negation *ne*): *imo xadi netu* or *imo ne xadi* ‘he does not come/go’.

When combined with other tense-aspectual markers or modal words, only *ne* was used in all varieties.

There are three types of modality expressed by different modal words, as presented in Table 5. Modal words may occupy the position before or after the verb, but normally before the tense-aspect markers.

Evidentiality was probably overtly expressed in the Ussuri variant of Chinese Pidgin Russian spoken by people of Tungusic origin (Nanai, Udihe, Oroch). One of the possible interpretations of the verbal marker *esi/est*’ is evidential: “. . . *est*’ is never used for events which are witnessed, i.e. seen by the speaker and/or hearer. It is used for nonwitnessed events which are asserted on the basis of evidence” (Nichols 1996: 247). This interpretation is supported by the fact that verb forms with the marker *esa/esi* never co-occur with the negation marker. However, in *Kyahta*, *esa/esi* obviously has perfective meaning.

Volition is expressed by the verb *xochi/xochu* ‘want, wish’:

- (8) *Jewó rabótaj ni xóču, jewó guláj-guláj xóču.*
3SG work neg want 3SG walk-walk want
‘He does not want to work, he wants only to have a good time’. (Ja)

Chinese Pidgin Russian uses no **copula** with predicative adjectives and predicative noun phrases. With predicative locative phrases, a copula may appear in past time reference (*byla*) (11), but it is still not obligatory (9, 10):

- (9) *Mishoka galiazyna.*
sack dirty
‘The sack was/became dirty’. (Sh)

Table 5. Modal markers

Type of modality	Marker	Examples
External modality (necessity)	<i>nada</i>	<i>Posle adawaj nada budu.</i> after give.back necessary FUT ‘I will have to give (it) back later.’
Internal modality (capacity)	<i>mogu</i>	<i>Adin liudi delaj kushi ne mogu.</i> one person make eat NEG can ‘One person cannot feed (the family).’
External modality (permission, possibility, advice)	<i>mozhnə</i>	<i>Səkazymaj ne nada, sama padumaj mozhnə.</i> say NEG necessary self think may ‘Do not report (to anybody), you should care about yourself.’

- (10) *Za təwaja Mikita deriani liudi.*
top 2SG Mikita bad person
‘Your Mikita is a bad person.’ (Ch)

- (11) [. . .] *ixiñ dimə desia byla.*
3PL house here was
‘Their house was here.’ (ZK)

Unlike a copula, the existential verbs *esi/est/ju* ‘there is’, *byla* ‘there was’, *netu* ‘there is no’ are used very consistently; they are used in possession constructions too, turning into a true possessive verb ‘to have’:

- (12) *Tibe ju piati kapeka?*
2SG be five kopek
‘Do you have five kopeks?’ (Vr)

6. Simple sentences

Chinese Pidgin Russian tends to have SOV word order (13); the next most common word order is OVS, especially with a pronominal subject (14).

- (13) *Adin liudi dərugoj liudi kushaj.*
one person other person eat
‘One creature eats another creature.’ (A)
- (14) *Sama ne magu, nichimo ne delaj imo, kushaj wari ne*
self NEG can nothing NEG do 3SG, eat cook NEG
umej imo.
know.how 3SG
‘She cannot (live) by herself, she does nothing, she cannot cook.’ (ZK)

Clauses with a pronominal subject may lack an overtly expressed subject.

Chinese Pidgin Russian, in its core structure, completely lacks both grammatical case and prepositions. Syntactic functions are assigned to the clausal arguments mainly on the basis of the general semantic context and word order:

Agent–Patient:

- (15) *Eta liudi patom dzimli kapadzi.*
this person then ground dig
‘Then this person dug the ground.’ (LJČ)
- (16) *Heczu liba kupi-la.*
Hedzu fish buy-PFV
‘Hedzu bought fish.’ (Sh)

Location:

- (17) *Sam gorod pashol jimo.*
self city went 3SG
‘As for him, he went to the city.’ (ZK)

Instrument:

- (18) *Buldozera rovno delaj.*
bulldozer even make
‘[They] leveled [the ground] with the help of bulldozer.’
(LJČ)

One has to rely on the semantic role of the argument in order to determine its grammatical role in the clause.

Chinese Pidgin Russian has no category of *voice*. The semantic role of agent corresponds to the grammatical relation of the subject, and the semantic role of patient corresponds to the grammatical relation of the direct object. The semantic structure of the clause is therefore inferred from the word order.

With ditransitive verbs, Chinese Pidgin Russian displays the double-object construction, though the theme object tends to occupy a position nearer to the verb.

- (19) *Jevó dúmaj majá jevó céna daváj.*
3SG think 1SG 3SG price give
‘He thinks that I give him the (real) price.’ (Ja)

Circumstantial expressions (location, instrument, means of transport, etc.), with the exception of time expressions, tend to occupy the position between S and V:

- (20) *Nada lipahoza kater cho vazí-la.*
necessary lumber.company cutter what carry-PFV
‘It was necessary to carry things to the lumber company by motor boat.’ (LJČ)

However, quite frequently the concrete interpretation of the argument structure of the clause is based on the general semantic context.

Interrogative constructions. Polar interrogative sentences normally do not differ from the corresponding affirmative ones. There was, though, a verb-repetition strategy, borrowed from Chinese (“A-not-A question”):

- (21) *Stára věšy maj pu maj?*
old thing sell NEG sell
‘Do you sell old stuff?’ (Ja)

In content questions, the interrogative phrase is moved to the left. The most common question word is *kakoj* ‘which, what kind, what, how’. Some other question words are constructed on its basis: *kakoj liudi* ‘who, whom’ (lit. ‘which person’); *kakoj manera* ‘how’, ‘of what kind’ (lit. ‘which manner’). At the same time, *kada* ‘when’ and *kuda* ‘where, where to’ are also often used.

7. Complex sentences

Complex sentences are not very characteristic of Chinese Pidgin Russian. Usually utterances consist of sentences of a rather simple structure. In order to make the argument structure

more transparent, the whole situation is often split into smaller situations so that each predicate has only one or at most two arguments.

- (22) *Tak hudo hodi, ego mogu streliaj. Ego dumaj, nasha chushka*
so bad walk 3SG can shoot 3SG think 1PL pig
est’.
be
‘We shouldn’t walk like that, they may shoot, taking us for wild pigs.’ (A)

The segmentation of the text into very simple clauses is a characteristic feature of all variants of Chinese Pidgin Russian. The clauses are linked by juxtaposition in the majority of cases. Coordinating conjunctions are never used. Adverbial clauses, however, can be introduced by the conjunctions *kada* ‘when’, *kuda* ‘where to’, and *ide* ‘where’, but they are optional:

- (23) *Ivo pomi-la tamə, ide zaxoroni-la chasa iwo*
3SG remember-PFV there where bury-PFV hour 3SG
kada.
when
‘He remembered the place where she (mother) was buried and the time.’ (LJČ)

8. Lexicon

A concordance of all lexical items used in all available sources of Chinese Pidgin Russian clearly shows that there was a lexical core shared by the majority of the sources, and a lexical periphery, often belonging to the speaker’s first language. Only about 100 words turn out to be common for the majority of sources. These are: personal pronouns, deictic words (*sich as* ‘now’, ‘today’, *siuda* ‘here’, *takoj* ‘such’), cardinal numerals, quantifiers (*noga* ‘many’, *mala* ‘few’, *sypka* ‘very much’), modal words and verbal markers, verbs (*kupi* ‘buy’, *hodi/hadi* ‘go’, ‘come’, *gamali* ‘say’, *delaj* ‘do’, ‘make’, *kushaj* ‘eat’, *pomiraj* ‘die’, *rabotaj* ‘work’, *sidi* ‘sit’, *taskaj* ‘drag’, ‘carry’, ‘steal’, *lamaj* ‘break’), nouns (*liudi* ‘person’, *dom* ‘house’, *fanza* ‘Chinese house’, *miasa* ‘meat’, *ryba* ‘fish’, *xəleba* ‘bread’, *pampusəka* ‘Chinese bread’, *syna* ‘son’, *sontsa* ‘sun’, ‘day’), and three adjectives (*xalosi* ‘good’, *shango* ‘good’, *sətary* ‘old’).

These lexical items had a rather wide range of meanings, e.g. *liudi* designated: 1. person; 2. people; 3. animal; 4. any animated creature. Verbs tended to be labile: *lamaj* could be transitive: ‘break’, ‘spoil’, ‘chop’, and intransitive ‘be broken’, ‘be spoilt’, ‘be chopped’, ‘be ill’.

Etymologically, the biggest part of the lexicon goes back to Russian. There were also some words of Mongolian origin (*adali* ‘as’, ‘like’, *shango* ‘good’, ‘well’) and loans from languages of local Tungusic minorities (*amba* ‘evil spirit’, *aja* ‘good’,

‘well’). A significant number of words go back to Chinese, especially in the variants spoken in Vladivostok and Manchuria (*kunia* ‘girl’, ‘daughter’, *laiba* ‘come here’, *juli* ‘to row’, ‘boat’ and others). There were numerous Russian/Chinese doublets in the varieties mentioned: personal pronouns (*maja/wody*; *tibi/nidy*), demonstratives (*eta/chega*), verbal negation (*ne*, *netu/bu*, *pu*), and the perfective form of the existential verb (*byla/ju la*). The origin of some rather widespread words is unknown: *kara-pchi* ‘steal’, *syoko* ‘very much’.

Glossed text

The text is taken from the archive of Alexander G. Shprint-syn. The archives are kept in the St. Petersburg Public library (archive N 1200). The present tale was written down in Vladivostok in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Xeczu familii chiwo-chiwo kupi-la, kurica jajcy
Xeczu family.name something buy-PFV chicken egg
Xeczu by name bought something, he bought chicken eggs

kupi-la, butyka apuskaj-la. Eta mamyka serdica,
buy-PFV bottle put.down-PFV this mother get.angry
and put them into a bottle. His mother got angry,

ivo kurica jajcy eta lamaj. Gawari: “Ni-nada butyka
3SG chicken egg this break say neg-necessary bottle
because all the eggs broke. She said: “You must not put

pusykaj jajcy, pyrawina pusykaj chachyka”. Xeczu lisa kupi-la,
put egg correct put basket Xeczu rice buy-PFV,
eggs into a bottle; you should have put them into a basket”.
Xeczu bought rice,

lisa kupi-la, chachyka pusykaj-la, lisa puloba-la.
rice buy-PFV, basket put-PFV rice get.spilled-PFV
he bought rice and put it into a basket, all the rice got spilled.

Mamyka gawari: “Tibe xuda xueyka, lisa burawina
Mother say 2SG bad gonorrhea rice correct
Mother said: “You are good for nothing; the rice should be put
into a sack”.

mishoka pusykaj”. Xeczu kapusa kupi-la, salata, muka ise
sack put Xeczu cabbage buy-PFV salad flour also
Xeczu bought cabbage salad and also flour

kupi-la, pusykaj mishoka. Mishoka galiazyna, mamaka
buy-PFV put sack sack dirty mother
and put them all into a sack. The sack became dirty; mother

gawari: “Ni-burawina tibe, ni-xarysha, eta kapusa
say NEG-correct 2SG NEG-good this cabbage
said: “You are not correct, no good. Cabbage

pyrawina pusykaj wada, moj chistyj”. Xeczu liba kupi-la,
correct put water wash clean Xeczu fish buy-PFV,
should be wash in water clean”. Xeczu bought fish,

eta liba pomilaj netu, eta liba kupi-la. Eta wada pusykaj-la,
this fish die NEG this fish buy-PFV this water put-PFV
he bought a live fish. He put it in water

eta liba ubizha-la. Mamyka gawari: “Tibe sasemu xuda,
this fish escape-PFV mother say 2SG quite bad
and the fish swam away. Mother said: “You are very bad,

sibyka bu xao. Ise sasema tibe ni-nada kupi.
very neg good more quite 2SG neg-necessary buy
absolutely no good. You should not buy anything at all.

*Dyrugoj raza tibe ni-nada kupi”.
next time 2SG NEG-necessary buy.
Next time you should not go shopping”.*

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Sources of examples

- A Arsen'ev (1949).
- Č Čerepanov (1853).
- Ja Jablonska (1957).
- LJČ from recordings made in Khabarovskij kraj in 1991 (speaker: Liu Juan Čin).
- Š Šprincyn (1968).
- Vr Vrubel' (1931).
- ZK from recordings made in Primorskij kraj region in 1985 (speaker: Zakpani Kančuga).